

BOOK REVIEW

The Meaning of Medicine: The Human Person

Edited by B Ars. Kugler, 2001, €28, pp 194. ISBN 90 6299 183 1

I read this book shortly after rereading *Confessions of a Medicine Man* by Alfred Tauber. (MIT Press 1999). As both these books are concerned with searching for the meaning of medicine in a world where scientific and technical goals predominate, it was inevitable that I should compare them. What intrigued me was how two books with a similar purpose could be so different.

Tauber is an American physician and philosopher whose book is a personal quest to seek out a medical ethos on which to base his practice. He therefore approaches his task biographically, relating a series of stories illustrative of medical issues that he has found troublesome during his medical career. He then uses these to explore those philosophical traditions he has found most helpful in coming to understand the proper basis of his practice. *The Meaning of Medicine: The Human Person*, on the other hand, is a collection of essays written by a number of continental philosophers and theologians and

is rooted in the Catholic tradition. They are developed theoretically, each one focusing on particular traditional areas of philosophical concern, such as the body and the mind; the status of the person; life and death, and the meaning of suffering and of illness. They are not explicitly related to each other, and so there is no clear development or conclusion to the book, only the general theme of respect for the human person.

Tauber starts from familiar medical scenarios and takes the reader on an engaging journey through his personal philosophical musings to his own resolution of how he considers medicine needs to be grounded in the doctor/patient encounter. He has an easy style and deals with difficult material in an accessible manner. In contrast Ars's collection is consciously scholarly, and is often dry and difficult to read. Some words even seem to have been newly coined by the authors—for example, "integrality" and "complementation". Also the authors are not principally interested in developing ideas about how to practise medicine better, but rather in how to extend the analysis of theological and philosophical themes which happen also to have a bearing on medicine. Both these books are aimed at practising physicians and if I had to recommend one of them to doctors, I have already said enough to make it clear that I would choose Tauber.

Having said that, I found some of the essays in Ars's collection interesting and valuable,

and the one I will select to comment on is "The human person and its destiny" by Thomas de Konnick. He points out that those who define the human person in terms of a "high personal standard" do so by reference to criteria relating to the mind, and so their account not only relies on mind/body dualism but goes further in excluding the body. So the subjective bodily experience of the world which is fundamental to the understanding of suffering and illness seems to be ruled out as of no relevance. He rightly concludes that such "absolute definitions disregarding common human experience must be deemed suspect" (page 79).

These two books demonstrate the continuing gulf between the theoretical orientation associated with the continental tradition and the more practical approach of the Anglo-American tradition. Both have their limitations but Tauber's success is in starting from practice but then making a convincing bridge with theoretical considerations, whereas Ars's collection remains firmly on the theoretical side of the divide. It includes some worthwhile scholarship, but if you wish to try it I would recommend selecting those essays that interest you rather than reading the book as a whole.

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